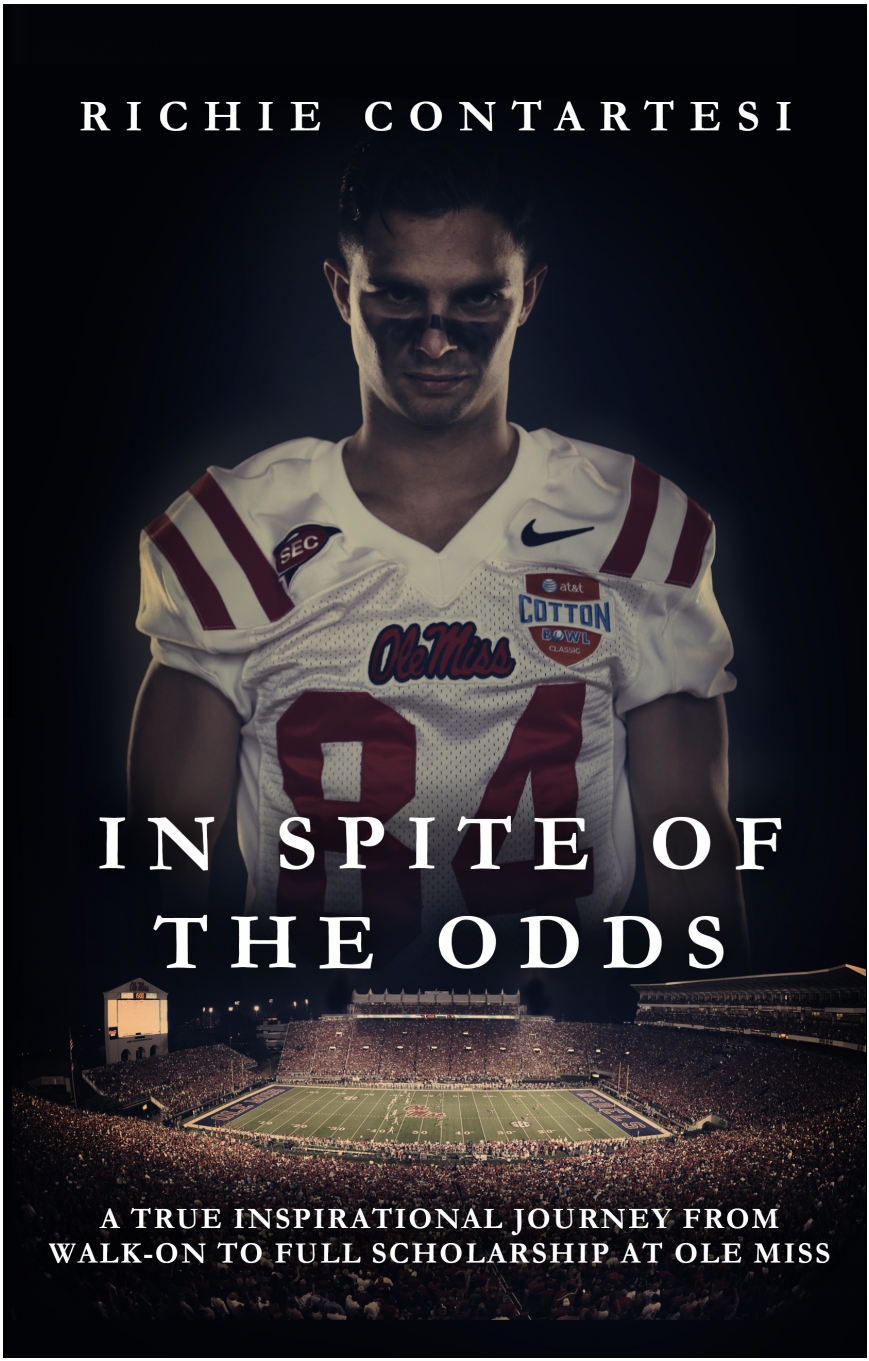
RICHIE CONTARTESI



IN SPITE OF THE ODDS

A TRUE INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEY FROM WALK-ON TO FULL SCHOLARSHIP AT OLE MISS

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A True Inspirational Journey from Walk-on to Full Scholarship at Ole Miss

RICHIE CONTARTESI

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CHAPTER 1

Building a Foundation

My story begins with an average kid growing up in the suburbs of West Palm Beach, Florida. The neighborhood was perfect because there were kids everywhere, tons of kids. It just so happened, though, that out of our big circle of friends, I was one of the youngest and the smallest. Watching some of those home videos are still hilarious to this day.

I started showing some athletic ability at a really young age. I was able to ride a two-wheel bike at three years old. While I was growing up, my best friend, Zach Legato, lived right across the street from me. He was a year older, bigger, faster, and stronger than me—and very athletic. Having him as a friend was great for me because, as I now look back and see, he was one of the real

reasons I was able to achieve one of my ultimate goals. He may not have known it, but he was always pushing me in sports, and I was always trying to keep up with him. We would play one-on-one sports all the time, and because he was bigger, faster, and stronger, it was a challenge for me to find ways to win—but I would. That kept things interesting, and more importantly, it kept the games flowing.

The other neighborhood guys we hung out with were older than both Zach and me—much older. One of my neighbors, Thomas Raab, lived right next door and played football for the high school team. I remember that one day, running around in the front yard wearing his helmet, I ran into a tree chasing a football; his helmet was so big it flopped around and landed sideways. I was eight years old at the time.

Growing up, we would play in the street or the front yard for hours and hours, just throwing the football, catching the football, throwing the football, catching the football; and I really attribute my hand-eye coordination to that—learning to catch everything that was thrown my way. After years of "practice," or what I considered playing, it was just natural. I didn't drop the ball once in a high school game, and I believe that all that practice, along with my love of the game, contributed to my success.

Zach and I invented our own games. On Sundays, we would wear New York Jets football jerseys and imitate our favorite players. He was wide receiver Keyshawn Johnson and I was wide receiver Wayne Chrebet. These were our favorite players, and the players who matched our athletic abilities. Keshawn was

taller, faster, and stronger than Chrebet, but Chrebet had better hands and was "the playmaker" (more about being a playmaker later). We'd find the biggest bushes we could throughout the neighborhood, and one of us would run and the other one would throw the ball upward; we would jump and catch the ball, fly into the bush and bounce out—sometimes the bush would make us flip.

At the time, it was all about having fun. I would call him at seven o'clock in the morning to ask if he wanted to play "bushes," and then we would play for hours. When I look back today, I see that we were unknowingly doing an awesome "drill" that led to the ability to go over the middle easily, without fear. The average person—kid or parent—would have thought we were crazy. After doing this "drill" of ours, I would come home with scars, scratches, and scrapes. Even during commercials and halftime of the Jets games we watched, we would run outside and play "bushes." We never played inside when I was a kid—unless we were grounded or it was pouring rain, and even then we often found ways to play outside. We would skimboard on the golf course behind our neighborhood or play tackle football through the puddles. We didn't care. I thought not being allowed to play outside was the worst possible punishment. I was having the time of my life. And then fifth grade happened.

Fifth grade was a very difficult year. I had trouble concentrating in class and when doing my homework. I think the problem worsened when my parents separated and eventually divorced. The combination of divorce and poor grades eventually led to an implosion of sorts for me when I failed the grade. Yep, I failed

fifth grade. I was embarrassed, demoralized. My parents and I spent the summer developing a strategy for me to get back on track.

I was fortunate to attend a small specialized school with only two other students in my grade. The school curriculum was very focused, and the teachers helped me improve my learning and studying habits. In one year, I compensated for my fifth-grade deficiencies and completed all the required course work to pass sixth grade. I worked hard, learned how to concentrate, and learned some valuable life lessons; and then I was ready to tackle seventh grade.

I started the year playing both baseball and football. I had a passion for football, but inside I knew baseball was becoming less important. As in the past, my dad signed me up for baseball but the excitement was gone. When I was very young, about four years old, baseball was fun, but as I got older, well, I was just bored. I didn't enjoy the game anymore, and I certainly didn't love it. I wanted to play football. I even tried to quit in the middle of the season, but my dad wouldn't let me. I remember sitting in the car on the way home from a practice, telling my dad, "The only reason I am playing baseball is for you." Now, I don't think I meant this, but I was really unhappy. My dad said, "You're not quitting, and you are going to finish the season. Once the season is over, you can move on." This taught me a lesson that would come into play often on the journey to my dreams, and would even save me a few times along the way: never quit and never give up, no matter how difficult the climb. There was another important lesson I learned during little league baseball, and it

came from one of my best coaches, Mike Jalad. He always asked, "What's the most important play?" We would answer, "The next play!" This has stuck with me throughout my whole career in sports and, currently, in business.

I don't know why, but throughout my little league football career, every team I was on was horrible. It seemed I was one of the best players on each team, and not because I was the fastest or the biggest—I was always below average in size. But one thing I learned in little league was to love hitting, and I worked harder and hit harder than most of the player on the team, no matter how big they were. My first coach said I was "the steal of the draft." Because my athleticism at the tryout hadn't been eye popping, I'd been drafted low, but when we put the pads on, I rocked everyone. I remember the first time I ever put the pads on and had hitting practice. I was running people over and hitting people left and right. My dad woke me up the next day for church and I was so sore I literally could not get out of bed. I think I rolled out of bed, but I ended up missing church. I loved playing defense, loved playing offense, loved special teams, and was always trying to run over people. I just loved hitting. And that love was what helped me excel when most everyone else was scared. I found ways to score and win games where we could, but the fact remained that I wasn't on the best of teams.

My third year, I played with a running back by the name of Brandon Pendergrass. He was an amazing athlete and his dad was our coach. Lonnie Pendergrass had played in the NFL. The two of them taught me a lot about the game and, specifically, the position of running back. Brandon went on to break high school

records and had a tremendous career at Wake Forest and then with the Baltimore Ravens. Playing against him in high school was a mission, but I am glad I learned what I did from him and his dad.

Right before I entered high school, I dislocated and fractured my elbow. It was completely disconnected and required surgery. To this day, there are some weightlifting and athletic moves I can't do because of it, and it's still tender and aches from time to time. This injury made playing in high school a little rough, especially in my freshman year. In high school, you have the freshman, junior varsity, and varsity teams, and through camp, I ended up working my way to the freshman-team position of starting quarterback. I had played a similar position through little league, because they usually selected the more athletic players for quarterback. Now, I was never trained to be a drop-back passer and or to learn the quarterback position correctly, but I played as an athlete running the option. At my high school, this usually doesn't happen. Usually by your freshman year, they are looking to mold a drop-back quarterback, and the athletes move to receiver and running back.

I had wanted to play quarterback, and I earned the starting role my freshman year at Wellington High School in Wellington, Florida. We weren't very good—I think we won one or two games—but toward the end of the year, I ended up playing safety as well. Happily, I was able to keep the hitting going. At this time I was about five feet seven, 140 pounds. My freshman year was really difficult for me as a quarterback, because the linemen were a lot bigger and I couldn't see over them. The quarterback coach

taught me how to look through windows as a smaller quarterback, how to drop back at an angle, and a few other techniques. I used this solution and also examined as much film on Doug Flutie as possible. You would be surprised at what you can learn from studying film, even just on regular TV. Part of freshman year was a good experience, but overall our win/loss ratio wasn't good.

Toward the end of my freshman year, I found out I'd be attending Palm Beach Central High School, a new school in Wellington. The new school was very different from Wellington High School because of the demographic and socioeconomic diversity of the student population. It was a melting pot. In my first year, through hard work and persistence, I found myself as the starting varsity quarterback in a Division 6 high school. That was a big deal. Division 6 featured the largest high schools in the county, each school stacked with the best players, including a number of D1 prospects. I was, again, probably one of the smallest kids on the team, but Head Coach John Timmins believed in me. He was extremely hard on me—harder than he was on any of the other players. At the end of the season, not only did I earn a special award but he also paid me with the highest compliment at the awards banquet. I will never forget his words, mentoring, and how he held me accountable for my play and actions. It was all worth it.

Unfortunately, we didn't win a single game—we went 0 and 10 my sophomore year—but I always found ways to keep the team together, and I played decently well for a fifteen-year-old playing with seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds. Though I started out as quarterback, I would also move to receiver from

time to time. Crazily enough, I led the team in passing yards and receiving yards. Losing all ten games was tough, but being a leader and working through adversity was something I faced in the past in my football career. This was probably my biggest character-building and humbling year, at least until I stepped foot on the campus of Ole Miss. I am telling you, it was tough going to keep practicing while constantly losing games—and not just losing, but getting crushed. One away game, against Centennial High School, we lost 77-6. Since I was the starting quarterback, I was the one who took the blame, not to mention the wrath, from Head Coach Timmins. He would rip me a new ear nearly every practice. It was a trying year, but I learned a lot about resilience and dealing with rough times.

The other reason I did well: my neighbor, Zach Legato, whom I'd grown up with. Remember "bushes"? He was my number-one receiver. Being a year older, he had always played in the older league, but now the only thing left was varsity, so we were finally playing together. All those years of throwing the ball back and forth to each other and being teammates in all our street leagues paid off. When he ran around, I knew not only exactly where he was but also the when, how, and why of his movements, and I was able to drill him. As you can imagine, that was a sweet situation.

I will never forget the awards ceremony after my sophomore season. We'd had the most painful year, not winning a single game. I had given my all to the team, but since we were a new school, we didn't have any seniors, and man, had this been a challenge. I was the leader and a focal point of the team. I'd taken a lot of punishment in practice and during games had been benched for

numerous reasons. Then at the ceremony, once all of the awards were given out, there was only one left: offensive player of the year. I knew it was coming because the award before was defensive player of the year. Even though I had led the team in passing and receiving, I knew there was no way that I would receive this award as a sophomore, not with the superior size and talent ahead of me. I thought J'Mayne Christian, our running back and the best athlete on the team hands down, would win the award. My head coach, John Timmins, said something that put my work ethic and attitude in perspective. He started out his speech by saying, "If I could put this player's work ethic in a bottle and sell it, it would be priceless. No matter what ups and downs he suffered, he came to practice ready to play, and he never quit when most players would." He continued to speak, but this resonated with me the most. When, at the end, he called my name, goose bumps started at my toes and traveled to the tip of my head. He handed me my first big award in football; before this, there had been the small trophies you get for little league every year. His statement still replays in my mind every day. It defined the person I was in college, and today it defines me in business.

Going into the off-season of my junior year, a new quarterback transferred in from another school—and he was really good. He was a well-established "actual quarterback." What do I mean by this? Unlike me, he had been training as a drop back and roll out passer. My coach didn't want to take the obvious route and play him though, both because he didn't want me off the field and because the new guy had transferred based on "off-the-field" issues at his previous school. Regardless, the goal was to win games, so

Coach Timmins ended up telling me I needed to learn receiver. I said to myself, "Okay, I could play slot receiver." I could even see this as a long-term arrangement, regarding college and the NFL. It had never crossed my mind that I couldn't play quarterback in college, but when I thought about playing receiver, it made much more sense. That whole summer I worked with the new quarterback and focused on learning receiver and learning timing with him.

While I was going into my junior year, Zach was going into his senior, and we were now the two core starting receivers. After all those years playing together, we were now starting and varsity receivers at the same time. Coincidence? I don't think so. I still believe it was the countless hours that we considered just fun that accounted for our developing the special skills we both needed to arrive where we eventually did. At the end of the day, he was bigger and faster than me, but for some reason, I always had a knack for making big plays. Whenever it was time to make a big play, you could assume the ball was coming my way. This was the biggest difference between us, in my opinion. I had this intangible skill to make the big play.

That brings us to my junior year, Palm Beach Central High School's second year. We again had a rough start to the season, but something changed with the team. In week six, there was a different aura in the air. The team felt different; there was just more energy.

It was homecoming week and we were playing Santaluces High School, which at the time was tied for first place in the

district. The game was very low scoring, and at half time, we were up 6-0. We still had not won a game in the school's existence up to this point, in year two. We couldn't move the ball at all on offense, but our defense kept us in the game.

At half time, before we went back on the field, I gave a quick speech telling the team that this was it—we were going to pull this off in front of a large homecoming crowd. When the team ran out of the tunnel, there was a sense of confidence and camaraderie. When we got back on the field we stayed positive despite continuing to struggle with offense. Our defense held them to 0 all game until the last three minutes, when one of their stars broke loose for a touchdown. This was tough, but we had time. That sensibility of my intangible skill started to trickle down my arms. Yup: it was time to make a big play. It was 3rd and 16 with less than two minutes left in the game, and we were on our own 40-yard line. Head Coach John Timmins called a play that was actually meant for the tight end running a corner route; Zach and I were on the back side. I had a post route, Zach a 10 yard in route. Our quarterback snapped the ball and rolled to his left looking for the tight end, the safety came down on the tight end, and I ran right past my corner and safety. My quarterback saw me and let it rip. It was a 45-yard pass in the air. I reached. I caught it. I didn't hear a sound or feel a thing. I was so in the zone that I couldn't think, speak, or hear. It is the wildest feeling in the world.

Immediately after I stood up from being tackled, it all hit me. The noise of the crowd screaming, the chanting, my teammates jumping on top of me. We ended up holding them for the final

minute of the game, and we won the school's first game—against the number-one team in the district on homecoming at that. It was worth all those losses. The stands cleared as everyone ran onto the field and celebrated; it was exactly what you see on TV after a huge upset. I remember running up to my dad as soon as the game ended and just breaking down. I had waited more than a year and a half for this day, and I made the catch that won the game.

Bragging about the high school glory days? I suppose, but I can proudly say I led Palm Beach Central High School to its first win in the school's history. To this day, having watched the film over and over, I'm not sure how it happened, but I am 99.9 percent sure that I wasn't faster than these guys. It's crazy when you see it on the film. The quarterback threw it upward and I just jumped into another gear and made the catch. The rush of the fans was incredible and unforgettable. Working hard to earn anything was becoming the norm in my life.

We ended up winning the next three games. I'd known that once we won our first, other victories would just start pouring in. Practice was fun, school was fun, and we had a real sense of love for each other. We didn't have a chance at the playoffs, unfortunately, but we ended the season—and entered the start of the new off-season—on a high note. I didn't win any awards that year, but Zach was named offensive player of the year as a senior. I was happy for him and also determined to win the award the following year.

The next year—my final year at the school and my third as

a captain—we lost a lot of our key players from the year before. I even played both ways. I started at receiver, defensive back, punt returner, and kick returner. My goal was to bring this team together and finally break into the playoffs. I remember that when I got to camp, I was in tip-top shape, but some of my fellow teammates were not. I was extremely mad and held everyone accountable by having the team run extra drills. As a captain, and simply as a player on the team, I took charge and ran extra along with them to show how much I cared.

We didn't do too badly as the year began; we started off slow, but things had begun to pick up by week four when, bam, I sprained my ankle. It was homecoming, with our new "black" jerseys on, and I was so excited for the game. The color of our regular uniforms were red and pewter. The black jerseys were a surprise from the football boosters. It was a muggy and rainy night. On the first play the quarterback threw me the ball, I caught it, and then I felt a helmet crash right into my ankle. I felt my ankle bend and I heard a pop and I knew I was done. I couldn't even hop off the field. When I tried tapping on my ankle, I knew for certain there was no way I could walk on it. Unfortunately, I needed a cast and ended up missing the next five games. I may have gained some really good stats in the first few weeks, but breaking my ankle midway through the season was a killer. However, because of a hurricane at the end of the year—of all the things to bring me luck—our final game was pushed back two weeks, and I was able to play.

We needed to win this game to get into the playoffs, and it was time. When I'd broken my ankle, all of the letters I was

receiving from D1 colleges immediately stopped. I didn't think or care about it. I just continued to rehab my ankle and get ready for the final game. I had more than four catches, including a huge 4th and 20 that we converted to take the lead at the end of the 4th quarter. Seem familiar? Well, it was and it wasn't. The opposing team drove down the field and, with time expiring, kicked a 40-yard field goal and won the game.

It was over. High school football was over. My goal to lead the team to the playoffs failed. We lost, I lost. Now not only was it over, but every school that had been interested in me, every bigger Division I school, dropped me from their list. It hit me once the season was over and I had time to think. I was worried, sad, and confused. More importantly, I was disappointed and down on myself.

One rule Coach John Timmins had for our team always stuck with me; and while it may sound very simple, it took me a long way toward doing things right. He said, "Be where you're supposed to be when you are supposed to be there, and do what you are supposed to be doing." Basically, if you are going to practice, be there early. When you are at practice, practice hard. There's no reason to play around at practice when you have the rest of the day to do whatever you want. Whether you are at school, at practice, watching film, or in the weight room, make sure that you are 100 percent engaged and that you are always bettering yourself. Don't goof around with your teammates and waste time. You are there to get better, reach your dreams, and help the team win. Give the team your all, and your team will give back to you. Lead by example. Show that you are committed and you care. If

you do this, life will have no other choice but to reward you.

When the season ended and high school football was over, Coach Timmins took me aside and said he was going to miss me, and that he was going to do everything in his power to get me a shot in college.

At the end of the season, we had the standard ceremony. I was so worried about getting into college and continuing my football career, though, that the award ceremony was the last thing on my mind. I just needed a chance to play D1 football. As the ceremony went on, I started paying more attention to the moment and enjoying being in the same room with my teammates one last time. After the initial awards, the coach, as always, went into the awards for defensive player of the year—which went to my best friend, Alex Roth—and then offensive player of the year, which went to the other captain, Tyler McDermott. He was a four-year starter at center and an awesome player who ended up playing at Colorado State.

At that point, I thought the ceremony was over and I was just out of luck, but Coach Timmins pulled out one last award. It was an award they'd never given before. He then began describing what this individual did for the team, as a leader and a player on the field. Noticing how the team suffered when this player was not on the field. How the player, even when he couldn't play, did everything possible to help the team from the sidelines. He then proceeded to say that the new award, for most valuable player, went to Richie Contartesi.

I went from low to high pretty quickly. I mean a team MVP

award at a 6A school in Palm Beach County should almost definitely get a D1 scholarship, right? Well, not in my case, unfortunately. Don't get me wrong. I was honored, but I still didn't reach my goal of signing a D1 scholarship.

I had an up-and-down career in high school. My stats were very strong and always flip-flopped with those of other top players in the county, such as Preston Parker and Brandon Heath, both of whom went on to earn D1 scholarships. They were also six feet one and six feet four, respectively. Spraining my ankle and being out for half the season my senior year had been a killer. Calls from colleges stopped, and so did my film and stats.

I was looking for schools in Coach Timmins's office every day after school. I was also talking to him about different schools, filling out forms and applications, and trying anything and everything to get in somewhere. Coach Timmins even made a call to Florida International University (FIU), a small D1 school in Miami. I was in his office when Timmins said he had a player sitting in front of him who "could walk on and who would eventually be a key contributor for you." Timmins then handed me the phone, and the coach proceeded to ask me questions; I don't think I could have sold myself any better. He then told me to come to his office the next day. I was thrilled and so thankful.

I didn't sleep well that night, and the next day, I bolted to Miami only to find that the coach didn't want me on the team after seeing my five-feet-seven, 150-pound frame. I'd no sooner walked in than he said, "Oh sorry. I just filled my last walk on spot." That was it—nothing I could say. He went back into his

office and shut the door. Wow, was that a let-down.

As mad as I was after that meeting, I was also determined—to show this coach that he'd just made the biggest mistake of his life. I was extremely motivated. I shot back up to Palm Beach and sat down with Timmins again. We went over a few opportunities with some really small schools. My best friend, Alex Roth, who was the other captain and middle linebacker, and I were both being recruited hard by the best D3 school in the country, Mount Union. So I said, "Heck with it, let's both take a road trip and check it out." At the time, Pierre Garcon, who would become the leading receiver for the Colts and Redskins, was their top player. They tried hard to recruit us when we stayed with them, but at the end of the day, it was D3 and it was far from home.

I also visited Jacksonville University, a D1AA school, on an official visit, meaning they pay for your trip. I wasn't impressed with the campus, the facilities, or the program, but between my size and injury, this was the biggest and best opportunity I had. I even had a few full scholarship offers from D2 schools, but again, I was set on going to the biggest. I ended up signing with Jacksonville University on a partial scholarship. Not only was this not a true D1 school but it was only a partial scholarship. This is where my sideways route to earning a full D1 scholarship began.

CHAPTER 2

Welcome to College Football

I MADE THE DECISION to go to Jacksonville University (JU), and Coach Timmons set up a signing day at my high school. The local newspaper reported the signing, but I didn't feel that it was a big accomplishment, so I didn't make a big deal of it; I just began my preparation. At this point, I was going to use my disappointment to make sure I didn't redshirt. I was determined to play right away, as a true freshman.

Over the summer following my senior year of high school, I trained for about eight weeks at Athlete's Advantage in Wellington, which a friend told me was the best place for

conditioning. When I arrived in Jacksonville, I was in really good shape. Well, at least that's how I felt when I first got there. Anyway, Athlete's Advantage was my first exposure to real college conditioning and training.

I was in a workout group with eight Division 1 signees. One recruit, an excellent southern Florida talent, had been offered scholarships from Florida State, the University of Miami, and the University of Florida, but he didn't have the grades. These types of players usually have to go to junior college (JuCo) for the first two years, get their grades together, and then sign with the D1 program that offers them an opportunity.

Athlete's Advantage provided me with an opportunity to train with the best athletes and begin preparing for football at the college level. Not only did I get to play with the best athletes in high school, but I also had the opportunity to train and refine my skills at Athlete's Advantage.

When I first walked into the facility, I was actually a little worried that they were not going to accept me. As it turned out, the coach, who knew all the best players in the area, also knew me, both from newspaper articles and word of mouth.

In my initial work out, I learned that a 110 was a 110-yard "stride," but with my short legs, it was more of a stride-sprint. Standard time for skill positions was fifteen seconds to run the 110 yards with a forty-five second rest. The conditioning we'd done in high school had never been timed and, in my opinion, had always been simple, but in college we had to be prepared to run these 110s.

My second day in the program, the coach informed us we would prepare for our goal of sixteen 110s by starting with ten of them. Each person was teamed with a partner. The partners ran side by side and our times were recorded. My partner was a receiver who signed with North Carolina State (NCSU).

Lucky me, he was six feet four and had the stride of a cheetah. It was okay though; I think the nervousness had my adrenaline running, which in the beginning definitely helped me out. The first three 110s were easy, but after the fourth and fifth repetitions, the entire group was falling out. People were either throwing up or were unable to move. I was in the unable-to-move category. After the fifth rep, my legs hurt so badly I had to lie down. Not one person passed the fifth rep. This was a real eye opener for me—I knew I had a lot of work to do.

Throughout the next seven weeks, we did our normal training for speed, strength, agility, and size, and we proceeded with conditioning toward the end of each session. We added one additional 110 every week. By the end of the eight weeks, I was recognized as one of the hardest workers and earned a lot of respect from the coaches and players. I not only kept up with some of these top athletes but also beat them in some of our timed and weight-lifting drills.

During our final conditioning test, I ran sixteen 110s like it was nothing and walked right out of the facility, not even sore. I was extremely thankful to the coach for the opportunity to be a part of an elite group. Without this intense training, I would have had a really rough start at Jacksonville University.

I wasn't the happiest camper when I did go to Jacksonville University—it had just seemed my only option. I vividly remember driving four hours to the college and not even feeling excited. I felt I had let myself down, that I wasn't reaching my maximum potential. I had always wanted to be the best, and I wasn't happy.

Now, scholarships at JU worked very differently than at most big Division 1 colleges. I wasn't on a full scholarship; mine covered roughly half. As a private school, Jacksonville University was really expensive—even with the scholarship. The dorms were old and needed a lot of work. The rooms smelled of moth balls, the floors were yellow, and in some spots the paint was peeling off the walls. But even though the dorms were a disaster, I ended up meeting one of the most important friends and influences in my life, Dean McNash.

Dean lived in the next room over from me, and immediately we hit it off, discovering we had a ton in common. To this day he is my best friend, and I don't know what I would do without him. He also played at Jacksonville during my first year but during camp incurred an injury that required surgery and ended his promising football career.

Dean had been an all-star high school linebacker for St. Thomas Aquinas, an extremely prestigious team in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The best of the best get scholarships there—and he was one of them. After his big injury on his first day in pads at camp, he experienced multiple shoulder problems and underwent numerous surgeries, which in turn stopped him from continuing

his football career. One of the biggest things Dean taught me was dieting, which really helped me through my college career. I'll talk more about that later.

On the first day at Jacksonville University, we had a team meeting. The staff did a walkthrough of the antiquated facilities, showing us the locker rooms, training facilities, and other areas. The stadium was old, small, and not as modern as my high school stadium. The coaches said, "Tomorrow is the one-ten test, so go to bed early." We all ate as a team that night, and I went to bed early.

I can't speak for everyone else, but this was my chance to immediately make an impact and show how hard I had worked over the summer. During the test, I ran ten 110s under fourteen seconds and was in the top three every rep. The upperclassmen had to run sixteen 110s. I quickly evaluated who the hard workers were in the receiver group. The next day we officially started camp.

Since it wasn't such a high-end college for football, JU didn't have great equipment, or even a jersey that fit me well. There I was, running around with an oversized, uncomfortable uniform flopping in the wind. I mean I know I am small, but they could have at least prepared something reasonable for me to wear—I was a signee. They couldn't order a medium or a small? This annoyed me.

After I nailed the 110s, it seemed that nothing went right that first week. I was really down to be honest; I felt bitter every day, filled with disappointment. I wasn't where I wanted to be. I wasn't performing on the level I wanted to be performing. I even

ended up getting in a big argument with two of the upper-class linemen in the cafeteria. That night I called my head coach from high school, John Timmons.

I vividly remember telling Coach Timmons how I felt, both physically and mentally. Uncharacteristically, I was dropping balls in camp, I felt slow, and I simply wasn't performing well. "Look, why do you think you were successful in high school?" Coach Timmons asked. "Because you had fun at practice and had fun in the games." That made a lot of sense to me, because since I'd started college, I had not been having fun. My frustration led to dropped passes, missed assignments, and other problems, whereas I had never once dropped the ball in a high school football game. From that point I thought to myself, "Look, if I'm going to be here, I am not going to quit. I'm going to be committed, and I'm going to go out and just have fun."

I woke up the next morning with the attitude that I was going to have fun, and that I was going to dominate. This is when I learned that self-confidence was the only way I was going to make it. From then on, I started taking over in practice and crushing the defensive backs in the "one on ones." A one on one is when the receiver goes against the cornerback with no one else on the field. You have a predetermined route, and the corner has to use man-based techniques to cover you. I dominated in most of the drills, completely taking over now as a freshman receiver.

The momentum was quickly shifting in my favor, as this was the point when the depth chart was starting to take shape for the upcoming season. Doing well in sports has a lot to do with

momentum. My goal at this point was to keep this momentum rolling.

In the second week of camp, I figured I had to do something bold to stand out and get the coaches' attention. I called out our best senior cornerback, Brandon Flowers, to cover me one-on-one in front of the whole team, and I ended up winning. I consider this another big turning point in the way the coaches viewed me.

After the first two weeks, I noticed something strange. A lot of the new freshman players were quitting. I didn't know if it was because of the school, the coaching staff, or their position on the depth chart, but players were definitely quitting.

Because of my early experience playing baseball, quitting was hard for me to understand. I had to finish what I started. I learned not to give up because things got too hard, because things didn't go my way, or when I was tired of an activity. In my opinion—to this day—quitters are just losers.

I'd made a complete turnaround on the field, and I was adjusting to college life at Jacksonville University. Things were really rocking and rolling for me. Now, I did have some good competition at receiver, especially from some of the older players, but I was playing with confidence.

At the end of camp, I was already planning on playing because of my position on the depth chart. To my dismay, the receivers' coach pulled me and one of the other receivers, Chad Oubre, to the side. The receiver coach informed us that they were going to

redshirt me and play him. We were both in shock after hearing the news. I felt I had outplayed him in camp. Chad, of course, was excited.

The coach said, "Chad is going to play because he is older and has more experience." He wanted me to take the year to learn the game. I was really frustrated and annoyed at going from the possibility of starting receiver to redshirting my freshmen year. Really? Why such a swing? I'll never know the real reason behind it. Did they think I couldn't do it?

Coaches say things to keep players motivated. For example, "You are younger and we wanted to prep you to have four years of domination." It's their job to motivate you, especially if you're on the practice squad.

Even though I redshirted at Jacksonville University, I got much better during the season on the practice squad. I decided that I was here, I was going to have fun this year, and I would use the practice squad as an opportunity to perfect my craft as a receiver. I wanted to learn how to run crisp routes and how to beat man coverage even better on the college level. On the practice squad, I picked up a lot of good habits. I never missed practice and I always played hard.

Halfway through the year, my best friend Dean ended up transferring to another university in Jacksonville, Florida. No longer playing football, he was off scholarship. Going to a private school was just out of the question financially.

Jacksonville was a small college and felt more like high school

rather than a university. There were only two thousand students in the school, and everyone knew everyone. Classes were similar to those from high school, and it wasn't the kind of college experience either of us wanted to have, so I didn't blame him for transferring. When he transferred, things became even worse. I was able to hang out on the weekends because I had my car, but the weeks consisted of boring classes, few friends, and practice squad.

That off-season, the training was rigorous, and I ended up gaining plenty of muscle. I was eating a lot, because I felt I needed to gain a lot of muscle and get big. My off-season squat was 400 pounds and I was benching 275 as a freshman, even though I was only five feet seven and weighed 170 pounds. As strong as I was, the extra weight and muscle were simply too heavy for my frame. I didn't realize this until I ran my slowest 40, at 4.8 seconds. I was in shock. One of the other receivers on the team even joked with me, saying I had run a "4-ever."

I mean I packed on some muscle and weight, but I didn't think it would slow me down as much as it did. From a high 4.5-second 40 to a 4.8-second 40. If you don't know 40 times, this is a huge difference. For example, in the NFL, the difference between a 4.49 and a 4.50 could make the difference of being drafted and making millions of dollars.

The coach and the staff that signed me as a freshmen were fired in the off-season. They hired a new coach, Kerwin Bell. Kerwin Bell had an excellent record as a high school coach, as a quarterback at the University of Florida, and in the NFL. The new

coaches came in and made dramatic changes—and it was a good thing for the university. The university, in fact, wanted to support the program more. After hiring Kerwin, the school purchased uniforms, upgraded some of the facilities, and strengthened its commitment to football. In general, the school made the right move, but in terms of my football career, it just pushed me back in no man's land.

Everything I showed the coaches in camp and during the season on the practice squad was history. I had to prove myself all over again, and unfortunately, I didn't have a very good spring at all. I feel the reason was because I had gained too much muscle and was too big for my frame. With both the weight and muscle slowing me down, I ended up pulling a quad during the first week of practice. It wasn't a very productive spring in my opinion, and I didn't impress the coaches.

The new coaches were focused on bringing in their own players for the following year. At the end of spring practice, there was always an internal scrimmage. While played only among our own players, it gave the coaches a chance to see the players perform at live game speed. I played very well in this game despite my injury and poor practice. I didn't get much playing time, but I ended up with three big catches. Spring practices ended, and I decided that that summer I was going to drop down in weight and work on nothing but getting my speed back.

That summer I didn't go out at all. I hung out with my girlfriend when I wasn't training, but I never went out or partied. I spent my time training, eating, and watching movies. I did fourteen

weeks of four-day-a-week lift and four-day-a-week run, and when I was running, I used "Strength Shoes." These special, strange-looking shoes have no heel, so they make you run on your toes. My workout partner, Eddie Brown, who would later go on to play football at Colgate University, and I both had the strength shoes. You can learn more about these shoes at www.EarnaScholarship.com/StrengthShoes. By the end of the summer we were able to run twenty-four 110s under fourteen seconds with a forty-five-second rest, which was pretty awesome.

That was the hardest three-month training regimen that Eddie and I had ever gone through in our lives, but by the end of that training, we were in terrific shape, and I felt like a bullet. At the very end of the summer, two weeks before I was headed back to Jacksonville University for camp, I received a call from my new receivers' coach, who said, "The numbers aren't looking good, so we're not going to be able to bring you back for camp this year. We'd like you to come back when school starts." What that basically meant was: you didn't have a good spring, and we don't think you're good enough to play during the year, and you're one hundred percent going to be on the practice squad.

They didn't think I was good enough to compete with the older receivers, whom I'd beaten out the year before, nor with the new receivers were they bringing in. After the vigorous summer training, I was pretty down; I remember I was driving in my car at the time of the call, and that I just started crying. When you put in the type of work I did—without direction, with pure self-discipline—something like this can be very disappointing. I called my dad while driving and told him what happened. I couldn't

control my emotions. Tears poured down my face.

After the call, I decided that it was over at Jacksonville University. I had about two weeks to figure out what to do, but with the new coaching staff doing what they were to all the players recruited the year before, there was no way I was going back. I wasn't a good fit with the school, the location, or the football program. Being there hadn't been my goal or what I wanted. I proceeded to make a spreadsheet with every D1 school that originally recruited me, and I went to their websites. I found the school phone numbers and coaches' names. I added them to the spreadsheet, printed it out, and began making calls to these coaches to see if they had a walk-on spot for me. After three days of making calls, I had no luck. I didn't even know what cold calling was at the time, but I was doing it. The coaches were nice and would try to help, but once they asked me my height and weight, the conversations ended pretty abruptly. Then finally it hit me. Kyle Strongin!